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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
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Mandated areas: culture

Draft recommendations

I. Introduction: culture and indigenous women: gender perspectives

1. Culture, loosely defined as shared values, beliefs, practices, in short as a "way of life", is intimately interwoven with the process of development and has thus become infused with power relations on a global scale. As anthropological critiques of the dominant development models have pointed out, public discussions about development are influenced by ethnocentrisms and value systems of the consumer-based, free market societies, i.e., Western-based and male-oriented systems of knowledge are given predominance, while indigenous and traditional systems of knowledge are being devalued, ignored or seen as mere "obstacles to development". Knowledge systems of indigenous women, as the essence of their cultural expression and identity, are thus faced with the double bias of Western and male forms of ethnocentrism.

2. The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has examined the collective and individual proposals submitted by indigenous organizations, representatives of the United Nations system and Member States in order to follow up the recommendations contained in the report of the Forum on its second session, in particular those contained in 93, 103 and 105 of the report.

II. Recommendations to Member States

3. The Forum, noting that work will commence shortly on a convention of cultural diversity, requests Member States to work with representatives of indigenous peoples at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to develop a document that adequately protects indigenous cultural heritage and, when it is completed, to ratify and fully implement that declaration.

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4. The Forum recommends that Member States adopt legislation acknowledging that the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples is their inalienable cultural heritage and embodies their cultural identity and that they make available such legislation and information in local indigenous languages.

5. The Forum encourages Member States to facilitate the establishment of civil society organizations, including indigenous organizations, to assist in the preservation and protection of indigenous cultural heritage.

6. The Forum recommends that Governments hold sports and athletic games involving indigenous sports, such as Mayan pelota.

7. The Forum recommends that Member States ratify the Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage and ensure that it is fully implemented.

8. The Forum recommends that Member States put in place policies and mechanisms to increase indigenous women's access to markets and capital in order to enable them to turn their traditional skills into sustainable forms of income generation.

9. The Forum recommends that Member States cooperate with indigenous women in putting in place social and legal mechanisms which protect indigenous women from the misuse of traditional practices (e.g., dowry and bride wealth) due to increasing modern consumerism, and from objectification through international "ethnic tourism".

III. Recommendations to the United Nations system

10. All United Nations systems organizations should recognize that indigenous cultures are intrinsically connected to indigenous peoples' traditional territories (lands, waters and natural resources).

11. Within the framework of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and its Action Plan, the Forum recommends that:

(a) All United Nations bodies and Governments establish appropriate monitoring mechanisms to document and take action against cultural ethnocide and its devastating effects on indigenous women;

(b) All United Nations bodies and Governments rethink the development paradigm and unequal relationship between Western influence and indigenous knowledge systems;

(c) All United Nations bodies and Governments initiate new ethnographic studies that re-evaluate stereotypical views on gender relationships within indigenous populations in order to challenge existing misconceptions by highlighting diverse community roles in which indigenous women wield real power and play leadership roles;

(d) Member States with indigenous populations develop multicultural public policies with a view to implementing the contents of the Declaration and strengthening, in an equitable manner, local cultures;

(e) UNESCO promote the recovery of underwater indigenous heritage, the oral tradition and ancient writings with a view to recognizing them as the heritage of humanity.

12. The Forum, noting that work will commence shortly on a convention of cultural diversity, requests UNESCO to invite it to participate in its deliberations.

13. Many United Nations system organizations, including United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, engage in activities that directly or indirectly affect indigenous territories and cultures. The Forum recommends:

(a) That the appropriate agencies, including those engaged in development activities, consider the protection of sacred species;

(b) UNESCO focus attention on the ratification of the Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage and on its effective implementation at national levels;

(c) UNESCO explore the links between the protection of tangible cultural heritage, intangible cultural heritage and sacred sites and other related UNESCO instruments with a view to broadening, strengthening and streamlining the protection of (indigenous) cultural heritage;

(d) UNESCO facilitate the participation of both the Forum and indigenous peoples' representatives in all relevant meetings of interest to them;

(e) Noting that the current UNESCO endangered languages programme seeks only to record endangered (indigenous) languages, that UNESCO expand its endangered languages programme to record, revive and reintroduce indigenous languages, in cooperation with indigenous peoples. This should include projects that support training in and teaching of indigenous languages at the community level.

14. The Forum recommends that all relevant United Nations entities, especially UNDP, the World Bank and other development institutions, give full recognition to alternative and participatory approaches to development and to ensure their actual application in development programmes.

15. The Forum recommends that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and other United Nations human rights institutions, and Governments:

(a) Set up appropriate monitoring and advocacy mechanisms to document and take action against cultural annihilation and its adverse effects on indigenous women;

(b) Ensure the observance of the essential human right to cultural expression, with special emphasis on women's forms of expression.

16. The Forum recommends that UNESCO, other cultural institutions and academic institutions:

(a) Recognize and document the diversity of gender relations in indigenous communities based on active community input and participation;

(b) Examine and document women's spheres of power in indigenous societies, taking into account traditional mechanisms of gender definition and

distinction (e.g., pollution/purity, gender specific roles in ritual, gendered division of labour);

(c) Examine and document the instrumental role of women in indigenous societies as the custodians of sacred knowledge and power, and as medical specialists;

(d) Highlight and give recognition to women's instrumental roles in indigenous societies as educators, healers and ritual specialists;

(e) Highlight indigenous women's traditional skills, arts and crafts and publicize them through the media, cultural institutions etc.

17. The Forum recommends that the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO):

(a) Have women's systems of knowledge formally recognized and protected;

(b) Formally recognize and highlight the roles of indigenous women in transmitting their culture and specialized knowledge through the generations;

(c) In developing proposals for the protection of indigenous knowledge and intellectual property, ensure that indigenous knowledge holders and peoples are recognized as the appropriate authorities to determine whether such knowledge should be commercialized.

18. The Forum recommends that the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNESCO, WIPO, the World Trade Organization and other relevant United Nations system organizations, together with the Forum, organize a workshop to discuss the holistic protection of indigenous peoples' cultural heritage, prior to the fourth session of the Forum. The workshop should aim to establish a framework within which protection of indigenous peoples' cultural heritage can be discussed, possibly in the form of an international regime. The framework should invoke all relevant United Nations system organizations and have the Forum as its coordinator.